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PROGRAM Panorama

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SUBJECT Aid for the Nicaraguan Contras

MAURY POVICH: Please welcome to Panorama Dof Droge, a free-lance consultant on national security issues. And for several Administrations, Johnson, Nixon and Reagan, he worked at the National Security Council as a resource expert.

Also, please welcome David MacMichael, a CI -- a former CIA analyst of arms traffic in Central America from March 1981 to April 1983; and in fact left the CIA when he felt that his superiors were not taking the information that he gathered and using it to the best advantage.

Also, please welcome Laurence Birns, a Director of the Council of Hemispheric Affairs, where David MacMichael, by the way, is also at these days. Larry Birns for years has been resolute in his views and feelings that the United States funding and the United States aid for the Contras, basically, serves no good purpose at all.

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Let's start with that. I mean you've heard General Singlaub talk about why we should fund the Contras. Why shouldn't we?

LAURENCE BIRNS: Well, I guess my primitive response to that is that there is no compelling reason I can think of why we should be funding the Contras.

I took with some interest that the President justified the action against Libya yesterday as an act of self-defense, which I'm sure that the General heartily agrees with. I'm sure he supports it.

POVICH: Well, there are countries, like Israel, that

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2

have been using preemptive strikes as an act of self-defense for a long time.

BIRNS: Right.

But I'm sure the General is somewhat agonized that the Nicaraguans had the gall to go into Honduras, which for three years, four years has been harboring the Contras. And then this becomes a notice of great outrage by the President, I'm sure by the General.

You know, I think, you know, it's a patent violation of international law, it's a patent violation of the Neutrality Act, an early treaty of the United States, early law, and it's wrong. It's nonproductive and it doesn't advance a diplomatic solution to the problems that are besetting the region.

GENERAL JOHN SINGLAUB: He's putting some words in my mouth. I was not outraged. I understand very well why the Sandinistas would make that raid across the border.

BIRNS: Is it self-defense? Was it an act of self-defense?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: They could justify it on the basis of self-defense.

BIRNS: Can you? What about you?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: I'm just saying it was a wonderful training opportunity for the Contras. They showed that their all-volunteer force, that their morale, their esprit is far superior to those draftees in the Sandinista force. And they threw them out. They inflicted 447 casualties, which is over 25 percent of the force that crossed the border.

DAVID MACMICHAEL: You saw these casualties, General?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Yes, I did. I brought back some videotapes of them.

MACMICHAEL: Well, I would like to see it, because so far the official count of the Honduran government...

GENERAL SINGLAUB: No, the official count comes from the Sandinistas themselves. They reported their casualties.

MACMICHAEL: Did they?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: A hundred forty-seven dead, 300-plus wounded.

3

MACMICHAEL: They did not report 147 dead on that, General. I beg to differ.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: I walked over the whole battlefield, young man.

MACMICHAEL: But you said...

GENERAL SINGLAUB: I walked over the battlefield. I talked to every one of the commanders.

MACMICHAEL: You said the Nicaraguan government has reported that.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: The forces in the area reported that to the Nicaraguan government in Managua. That's their official count of the task force commander.

MACMICHAEL: That count has not been announced by the Nicaraguan government.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Well, of course it hasn't been announced.

MACMICHAEL: Well, then it's not an official statement, is it?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Well, it's as official as...

MACMICHAEL: We're just going to have to rely on your word that you picked this up somewhere.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: I did not pick it up.

MACMICHAEL: Well, where did you get it?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: It was monitored by the Contra force. They...

MACMICHAEL: Oh, so it came from the Contras, then. You're having the Contras report this magnificent victory.

POVICH: What are you trying to get at?

MACMICHAEL: Well, I am just saying that General Singlaub is bringing forth this as a demonstration of the great military power of the Contras, and he is relying -- he is relying on what he now tells us are Contra sources who tell him this.

POVICH: Did you not consider that a victory for the Contras?

4

MACMICHAEL: I have no idea, because I was not there. What I can tell you...

GENERAL SINGLAUB: I was.

MACMICHAEL: What I can tell you is that what has been shown by the Honduran government so far are five prisoners and -- no. I beg your pardon. They believe they have seven prisoners and five bodies that have been shown. Now, this is it.

But what General Singlaub points out here comes, as I tried to ascertain, from Contra sources, who -- I hate to tell you this, but I would not trust anything that comes from them.

DOLF DROGE: Well, Mr. MacMichael, when you get into this thing, one of the problems with the Sandinista situation was they couldn't live on the fantasy of Michael Barnes and they couldn't live on the fantasy of the left-wing House of Representatives' members, who said, "The Contras are really no threat. They're hopeless. They're ineffective. And giving them money won't help." And they've been cut off for 19 months.

Instead, during that 19 months they've doubled in size. And doubling in size...

MACMICHAEL: By their own count.

DROGE: That's not by their own count. That's by...

MACMICHAEL: Yes. And by Edgar Chamorro's statement that the Central Intelligence Agency directed him to double the numbers.

DROGE: Mr. MacMichael, they doubled in size because they are not rapists, murderers and plunderers. They are the very people who had come together in 19 groups to overthrow Somoza. And one other group was with them, and that was the Sandinistas; and they became malignant and they left their promises of '79. And we gave our first aid to that group...

MACMICHAEL: What were those promises?

DROGE: More money in two years than we gave Somoza in 20 years, starting in 1979. And we gave it to the Sandinista government. And it's other 19 groups.

MACMICHAEL: That is not even the case. Because the legislation to which you refer reserved 60 percent of the \$75 million appropriated for direct delivery to private non-Sandinista groups.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Well, they received \$118 million, in

any case.

DROGE: Of course they did, because the Sandinistas were only one party out of 19, Mr. MacMichael.

MACMICHAEL: I daresay that is the case.

DROGE: That's right.

MACMICHAEL: But it was not to the government that these grants were made. It was made to specific...

DROGE: It was to the coalition that came to power...

MACMICHAEL: No, sir.

DROGE: ...on the promises of 1979. And those broken...

MACMICHAEL: What were these promises?

DROGE: Free and democratic Nicaragua, independent judiciary, respect for human rights, and elections, free and democratic elections.

MACMICHAEL: Well, they had free and democratic elections.

DROGE: Oh, you think they were free and democratic?

MACMICHAEL: Yes. I was a qualified international...

DROGE: Well, go to East Germany and you'll find their counterpart.

MACMICHAEL: Well, then, why, indeed, did every international group that came there to observe that...

DROGE: Every international group?

MACMICHAEL: Yes.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: No. I disagree with that.

MACMICHAEL: Which one did not? Which one -- the vast majority of them. Which one did not?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: The group that certified that the elections in El Salvador were honest said that these were dishonest elections.

MACMICHAEL: Which group was...

6

GENERAL SINGLAUB: This was the international group that was brought together to supervise it.

MACMICHAEL: Which one group was it?

DROGE: Three hundred observers, 29 countries, 19 members of Congress said the El Salvador elections were honest and democratic elections.

MACMICHAEL: Well, we're not talking about the Salvadoran elections. I'll give you the Salvadoran elections.

DROGE: And if you had that same kind of participation, you would have had a chance to get a balanced international view on those elections.

MACMICHAEL: Why did the Latin America Studies Association declare in its official report...

DROGE: Who are they?

MACMICHAEL: Fifteen distinguished United States political scientists carefully selected for balanced views on this, Latin American specialists, come up with their conclusion that the election was free, fair, honest, hotly contested, and that the largest disruptive element was the actions of the United States Government.

DROGE: But Mr. MacMichael, some people are, like Mark Twain said, they're born intelligent and outgrow it.

MACMICHAEL: Is that right?

DROGE: Yes. And in the case of those scholars you refer to, you have to understand that when they looked...

MACMICHAEL: That they disagree with you.

DROGE: When they looked at that election, there was one issue that couldn't be run in that election. You could not come out against the Sandinista revolution.

MACMICHAEL: That is not true.

DROGE: You could have -- from the spectrum of the nine parties, you could not oppose the Sandinista revolution.

MACMICHAEL: That is absolutely untrue.

POVICH: We've got some ground to cover. Let's try to get to the issue tomorrow.

7

Why, Larry Birns, should the House of Representatives turn back this Senate-passed bill?

BIRNS: Well, my belief is that we are watching here not really an authentic revolutionary body, even though it's a conservative body...

POVICH: We're talking what, the Contras?

BIRNS: We're talking about the Contras right now. That is, it has really emerged from this conversation -- I was musing over what was being said. Here you have an operation that was certifiably and demonstrably created by the United States in...

GENERAL SINGLAUB: I don't agree with that at all.

BIRNS: Now, John. Come on now, John.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: It was not cre...

BIRNS: John, they wrote -- the CIA wrote the statements that were issued. They arranged the press conferences. This...

GENERAL SINGLAUB: They helped them, but it started long before CIA got in the act.

DROGE: Where'd it start, Larry?

BIRNS: It started -- it started...

DROGE: When the broken promises of the Sandinistas shut down many of the aspects of the expectations of 19 groups, and they became contra, they became freedom fighters.

BIRNS: It didn't start that way.

DROGE: There were no freedom fighters in '79, '80 and '81. And they came to the CIA in '81.

MACMICHAEL: No, but there were cattle rustlers and gangsters working along the border...

BIRNS: That's right.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Oh, come on. That's so ridiculous. I know them.

DROGE: Why did the Defense Weekly Intelligence Summary of July 1982 say that, then?

POVICH: So what you're saying, Mr. MacMichael and Mr.

8

Birns, is that if there were, for instance, former Sandinistas in the Contras, they were disaffected because they were cut out of power and because that's the reason...

BIRNS: No. I think all sorts...

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Forty percent of them are former Sandinistas.

BIRNS: All sorts of things happened after...

MACMICHAEL: Eden Pastora? He's one you can name. Name me another.

BIRNS: The Contra membership eventually became more variegated than it was at its founding. Clearly, there were internal dynamics that were taking place there. But -- that is, I dispute the validity of the operation, and even if it has emerged as a broader and more pluralistic body. I have nothing against them attempting to attack Nicaragua. What I do have against -- I think they have a perfect right to do that. What I do have against this is the skulduggery that has been involved in terms of U.S. Government and private-sector involvement in that war. That is a war that is demonstrably being run from Washington, from the National Security Council.

POVICH: Okay. I understand that.

Quickly, as you finish, what would happen if they get the money?

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Well, one of the first things they'll do is to acquire some air defense missiles to defend against the very serious threat of the helicopter gunships.

DROGE: The Cuban-piloted helicopter gunships.

MACMICHAEL: They are not piloted by Cubans.

DROGE: That's what the voice transmissions tell us.

POVICH: And let me ask you this...

MACMICHAEL: You can interpret that...

POVICH: And quickly, Mr. Michael and Mr. Birns.

DROGE: Yes. You can understand a Cuban accent from a Nicaraguan accent.

POVICH: If they don't get the money, the Contra issue

is over, and you work -- what -- to try some kind of political opening of the process by the Sandinistas?

BIRNS: Well, first of all, I believe that the United States has the obligation, if there's no Contra funding, to provide the Contras with the option of going to another country, with some sort of financial payment to help them do this.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: [Laughter]

BIRNS: No, I'm quite serious.

DROGE: But they're Nicaraguans.

BIRNS: I think this would be a humanitarian effort.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: That is, you would prefer to turn it over to the communist government that is now in Managua.

BIRNS: I don't think it's a communist government, John. I think that is -- that's not analysis, John.

GENERAL SINGLAUB: Well, they believe they are. They say they're Marxist-Leninists.

POVICH: We have to leave, unfortunately. Good discussion. And we'll find out the results of it tomorrow in the House.

Mr. Droge, Dolf Droge, recommends this book.

DROGE: "The Revolution Lobby," by Brownfeld and Waller.

BIRNS: I just read the section on me, and it's a total invention.

POVICH: Okay. All right.